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ABSTRACT

This paper cites some of the contributions that sociology has made to desegregation policy. The major contribution, made by public opinion research, is establishing the level of support or opposition to busing policy. A second contribution to desegregation policy has been made by those sociologists and social psychologists who have studied the educational consequences of desegregation. The main contribution of this research has been the elimination of unproven assumptions about the educational and social benefits of desegregation and segregation. Research in the area of white flight stands to have the greatest impact on future desegregation policy because unlike public opinion or educational-benefits research, there is ample precedent for introducing evidence on enrollment stability to the lower courts considering alternative desegregation plans. (Author/AM)

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# SOCIOLOGY AND SCHOOL BUSING POLICY

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## PREFACE

This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at The American Sociological Association meetings in New York City on September 1, 1976.

## SOCIOLOGY AND SCHOOL BUSING POLICY

The first American Sociological Association forum on school busing is a welcome occasion. First, it gives us the opportunity to survey the events of the last five years or so, a period which has witnessed rapid change on the school desegregation front. Second, it serves to underscore the special role sociologists and social psychologists have played in desegregation policy and in the controversies that have raged around it since 1954. Judging by the impact of Coleman's white flight study, it seems to me that our involvement is deeper than ever, although at times our internal controversies threaten to overshadow the truly significant contributions of recent desegregation research.

Many of my colleagues will protest the label "contribution," preferring to view some of the new research as attempts to undermine constitutional rights. I disagree. True, some recent research findings on the educational and social consequences of desegregation are upsetting to those who believe in the ultimate benefits of mandatory busing policy. But, if we are to be faithful to our science, we must not let our prior commitments blind us to new facts. In the long run, society will be better served by policy based on sound knowledge rather than policy based on dogma.

Today I would like to mention a few of the contributions sociology has made to desegregation policy. Some of these contributions may not be recognized as such, and in some cases the full impact may not be felt or realized for many years; this is especially true for research still embroiled in controversy. Nonetheless, I would like to comment on current desegregation research and on its potential implications for future desegregation policy.

### PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

The first and perhaps least controversial contribution has been made by public opinion studies. Since polls have become so commonplace these

days, we might easily overlook the significance of public opinion on the busing issue.

The major contribution made by opinion research is establishing the level of public support or opposition to busing policy. For example, we know that in 1975 nearly 75 percent of white Americans opposed school busing for the purpose of racial balance; only 18 percent favored it (*Gallup Opinion Index*, 1975; Weidman, 1975). Moreover, these levels of opposition and support have remained strong in spite of the continued vigorous pursuit of busing policy by many government agencies, including HEW, the Department of Justice, and, most important, the Federal courts. Indeed, not since Prohibition has a Federal policy been imposed so forcefully upon such an unwilling and opposed public.

Opinion research has also established that the level of support is surprisingly divided in those minority populations who are supposed to benefit most from busing. Recent Gallup polls reveal that only 40 percent of black Americans favor busing to attain racial balance, while 47 percent are opposed; the rest are undecided (*Gallup Opinion Index*, 1975). This same split is revealed in 1971, when the Supreme Court first approved mandatory busing plans (*Gallup*, 1972). This division is surprising primarily because the Brown decision and the school busing orders that followed have been the major symbols of the civil rights movements, and symbols promoted intensely by the NAACP. From this standpoint alone one would have predicted much stronger support from the black rank-and-file.

Although these facts may not be controversial, they do have different interpretations. One view is that anti-busing attitudes reflect latent racism. But this is clearly an oversimplification. The same type of opinion polls also show strong support for school integration among both white and blacks. This finding, along with the substantial opposition to busing among blacks, suggests that other issues are involved. One such issue might be a strong belief in the right to choose a neighborhood school.

Quite aside from how we interpret these facts, what is their significance? One might deny the relevance of public opinion on this issue, asserting that the matter properly belongs within the courts to be settled as a matter of law. Indeed, the courts themselves have rarely, if ever, taken into account black or white public opinion when making a busing

decision. Whether we agree with this policy or not, I would argue that the matter is no longer strictly a court issue, and that continued public opposition to busing will have a substantial impact on future desegregation policies.

Let me amplify. We know that most urban school districts with large numbers of minority students have declining white enrollments. Of the 20 largest central-city school districts, 13 are now predominately minority, as of the fall of 1975, and several others will join this category within the next few years if present enrollment trends continue. Quite aside from the *reasons* for this decline, the fact is that intra-district desegregation is rapidly becoming infeasible in the very areas that have the largest concentrations of minority students. (I am assuming here the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights definition of desegregation, that being no more than 50 percent minority in a given school.) At the same time, the Supreme Court has ruled out metropolitan or inter-district remedies for central cities except in cases where outlying suburban districts can be shown to have contributed directly to the inner city's unlawful segregation. This will be an unlikely showing in the vast majority of central-city school districts, just as it was for Detroit.

Therefore, if the only feasible policy for many urban areas involves a metropolitan plan, and if the courts will not order such plans, then the only recourse is through normal legislative channels. And whether or not we agree with the current public opposition to mandatory busing, it is a political reality that will undoubtedly influence legislative action at the present time. Those who support mandatory desegregation on a metropolitan basis will have to make a stronger case for it to the public, or else they will have to settle for desegregation plans more compatible with public opinion.

## EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

A second contribution to desegregation policy has been made by those sociologists and social psychologists who have studied the educational consequences of desegregation. Here, as for the white flight research, there has been considerable controversy within the field over what

constitutes reliable evidence; the reaction to my own essay on this topic in 1972 is a case in point. (Armor, 1972; Pettigrew, et al., 1973; Armor, 1973.) It is my sense, however, that with the appearance of several new studies within the last two years this particular controversy has died down considerably. We now have Gerard and Miller's (1975) in-depth case study of Riverside, California, which offers the longest-term examination of desegregation effects to date (about six years for achievement results). We also have St. John's careful and comprehensive review of 120 desegregation studies (1975).

The major contribution of these new works is establishing that, for the vast majority of desegregation programs evaluated with reasonably rigorous research designs, no significant and consistent gains in academic achievement have been shown for minority students. Of course, many of these studies suffer from a number of methodological limitations, so it would not be fair to say that the no-gain thesis has been proven definitively. But the sheer number and consistency of existing studies, in spite of differing research strategies and varying desegregation settings, render the achievement-benefit thesis increasingly unlikely. The situation is similar for a number of relevant attitudinal measures, such as self-esteem and aspirations.

To say the least, many pro-busing sociologists will not view these research findings as contributions to desegregation policy. But this may be a short-sighted view. We must remember that ten years ago a strong case was built for mandatory desegregation partly on the basis of the educational-benefit thesis, where anticipated achievement and attitudinal gains were viewed as the most important consequences of desegregation. This is especially true for the important report, *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools* (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1967), which relied heavily upon reanalyses of data from Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity* study (1967) to argue the educational-benefit thesis. But it was not until the 1970s, after many school districts had started extensive desegregation programs, either voluntarily or through court order, that more adequate studies of desegregation effects were completed.

There is no question that many educators, many courts, and the vast majority of black parents who support busing have come to believe that

school segregation causes low achievement and poor attitudes of black children, and that desegregation will improve the situation. While this belief is no doubt grounded in the 1954 Brown decision, later studies such as the *Racial Isolation* report undoubtedly bolstered it substantially. And, to the extent that collective or individual decisions have been based upon this belief, it is incumbent upon us to share new knowledge that fails to support the original thesis.

Accordingly, the contribution I see is the elimination of unproven assumptions about the educational benefits of desegregation, clearing the way for a desegregation policy based upon a more realistic assessment of the actual effects of segregation and desegregation. For example, metropolitan plans with mandatory busing are easier to defend if there is solid evidence of educational and social benefits for minorities, since voluntary programs generally involve only a fraction of the minority students in a given district. Without such evidence, and without any legal basis for a court-ordered metropolitan plan, we have few grounds with which to convince the public -- or ourselves, for that matter -- of the necessity of a mandatory policy. And if we cannot convince the public, then any plan adopted by legislative bodies is likely to be voluntary in nature.

Is this really a loss? Some recent research has raised the possibility that unintended and unexpected consequences have resulted from busing. For example, Allport (1954) contact theory holds that interracial contact will reduce prejudice and improve race relations only under certain conditions, the main one being "equal status" contact. Given the achievement differentials between white students and most minority students after desegregation, and given the importance of academic performance in determining status within schools, then it is possible that desegregation actually retards race relations. This may be the reason why a majority of the non-cross-sectional studies reviewed by St. John showed a worsening of prejudice measures for both blacks and whites (four out of seven studies of black attitudes and five out of seven studies of white attitudes). While voluntary programs may not necessarily

show different results, at least they offer the opportunity to encourage participation by those groups that have the most favorable prognosis for a positive interracial experience.

As far as court-ordered busing cases are concerned, the contribution of educational benefit research is not yet clear. On the one hand, desegregation cases generally focus on the much narrower question of whether state actions can be shown to have contributed directly to school segregation. If the court decides they have not, then the case is dismissed (subject to appeal). Otherwise a second hearing is held to determine a feasible remedy, which inevitably means a plan that eliminates or substantially reduces racial imbalance, hence busing or other mandatory school assignment plans. Thus at the District court level there is rarely any consideration of the educational effects of segregation or desegregation.

On the other hand, some constitutional scholars point out that the Supreme Court's rigid adherence to the state action principle is not wholly consistent with its remedy prescriptions (Goodman, 1972). The crux of the problem is the court's failure to consider the neighborhood school as an appropriate remedy. If neighborhood schools are legal in districts without a history of dual school systems, why are they unacceptable for de jure segregated schools, once the dual system has been dismantled? It is understandable that mandatory busing might be imposed in the case of recalcitrant school boards that consistently undermine attempts to end intentional segregation. But such a rationale has never been offered by the court, and in fact mandatory busing has been imposed on a far broader basis than this, especially in northern school districts.

The truth is that a clear rationale for mandatory busing remedies has never been offered. It could be the court believes de jure school segregation is the cause of residential segregation in the first place, although such a conclusion seems untenable on its face. Or the court might believe that damage is done to minority students only when segregation is sanctioned by state action, and this damage is remedied only by eliminating racial isolation. In this case, the new evidence on educational consequences of desegregation is definitely relevant to future deliberations

on remedy practices. But such deliberations can take place only at the Supreme Court level, and as yet there are no indications that the Supreme Court is prepared to do so.

However, a new opinion by the California State Supreme Court in the Los Angeles case does face up to the de jure-de facto problem by declaring all segregation illegal under the California Constitution, regardless of cause (Crawford vs. Los Angeles Board of Education, 1976). Not surprisingly, the court justifies this distinct departure from Federal Court policy by citing the original "harm" argument offered in the Brown decision, asserting that such harm does not depend upon the de facto-de jure distinction. Interestingly, the decision quotes heavily from the *Racial Isolation* report, especially those passages dealing with educational and psychological damage accruing from racially isolated schools. It is my opinion that if this court carefully reviewed all of the non-cross-sectional studies published since 1967, the conclusions of the *Racial Isolation* report would not be supported. Perhaps the California Supreme Court has finally set the stage for a serious and rigorous legal review of the scientific evidence on busing, a review that would be beneficial for both the law and the social sciences.

WHITE FLIGHT RESEARCH

Finally, we come to white flight research. Of all the desegregation research done to date, I think the white flight research stands to have the greatest impact on future desegregation policy. The reason is that, unlike public opinion or educational-benefits research, there is ample precedent for introducing evidence on enrollment stability in lower courts considering alternative desegregation plans.

The District Court for Allegheny County near Pittsburgh held a newly-created school district unconstitutionally segregated because a state school board had failed to take into account the possibility of white flight, thereby causing the new district to become black within a few years. Perhaps more important, a recent fifth circuit court opinion on the Atlanta case seems to have opened the door to a consideration of the white flight problem:

> Today hindsight highlights the resulting erosion, revealing that every judicial design for achieving racial desegregation in this system has failed. . . . A system with a 70% white majority when the litigation began [1958] has now become a district in which 85% of the students are black. (Calhoun vs. Cook, 1975.)

Finally, even the recent Los Angeles decision makes a reference to white flight in determining "reasonably feasible" desegregation plans:

> We have learned that the fastest path to desegregation does not always achieve the constitutional objective; it may instead result in resegregation. (Crawford vs. Los Angeles Board of Education, 1976.)

Clearly, then, the importance of the white flight controversy far exceeds the current debate among researchers. If it is determined that white flight is largely nonexistent, or that it is not attributable to court orders as some of Coleman's critics have stated, then there is no reason to expect a change in the present course of court-ordered busing policies. But if white flight is caused by court orders, at least under certain conditions, then courts might take these conditions into account when fashioning a remedy.

What is the evidence on white flight? We now have three fairly comprehensive national studies on white flight, all of which appeared at roughly the same time. Coleman (1975) concludes that desegregation accelerates white flight, and the effect is intensified if the school district is (1) larger, (2) has a higher proportion of minorities, and (3) is surrounded by nonminority suburbs. A second study by Rossell (1975) disputes these conclusions, claiming that her own analysis of 86 northern school districts showed no significant and consistent relationship between amount of desegregation or court-ordered busing and white flight (with two exceptions: Pasadena and Pontiac). However, Rossell presented a second paper orally at a Boston University symposium based on a reanalysis of her data with a corrected criterion measure (Rossell, 1976.)* She modified

*Rossell's first paper analyzed changes in percent white, which reflects not only white enrollment changes but black enrollment changes as well. In her second paper, she analyzed percentage changes in white enrollment from year to year.

her original conclusions somewhat, reporting a stronger relationship between court-ordered busing and white flight. Finally, Farley (1975) presented a paper in which he concluded that there was no relationship between the amount of desegregation and white flight. But in his more extensive analysis prepared for the ASA forum, Farley (1976) also modified his conclusions somewhat by reporting a stronger relationship between amount of desegregation and white flight in the largest central cities.

With these new analyses, then, there may not be as much disagreement between Coleman, Rossell, and Farley as has been portrayed. There is of course the extensive critique of the Coleman study by Pettigrew and Green (1976) but, since the critique depended heavily on the Farley and Rossell papers, its status is unclear. Perhaps the controversy will boil down to a debate over the size and duration of the effects, and the conditions under which the effects vary.

Let me try to clarify these latter issues somewhat by summarizing my own white flight study which has not yet been published in final form.* The goal of my study differs somewhat from the other three in that I specifically set out to explore the effects of *court-ordered mandatory* desegregation rather than the effects of the *amount* of desegregation without regard to court orders. The reasons are simple enough: First, court-ordered busing is the most important desegregation policy issue today; and second, one might expect white flight to be more problematic in those districts where opposition to desegregation leads to the necessity of a court-ordered plan.

The methods of my study also differ in various ways from the other three, although it also embodies some common elements. The methods can be summarized as follows:

(1) Except for a control group, the universe for the study consists of all school districts with an enrollment over 20,000 in 1968, with a percentage minority over 10 percent, and with a *specific* court order involving a mandatory desegregation or student reassignment plan; I found about 45 school districts that met this condition.

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*See David J. Armor, "Segregation and Desegregation in San Diego," report prepared for San Diego Unified School District, 1976.

(2) Based partly on other research and partly on my hunches about the conditions under which court orders might or might not have an effect, I organized these districts into five main groups:

A. Minority enrollments between 20 and 50 percent, with developed suburbs outside the district;

B. Minority enrollment between 20 and 50 percent, without developed suburbs;

C. Minority enrollment over 50 percent;

D. Minority enrollment 10-20 percent;

E. Florida

The reason for grouping Florida districts by themselves is due to the size of Florida districts, all of which are extremely large counties, and to the fact that all of the Florida counties experienced court-ordered busing within a two-year period from 1969 to 1971. In other words, Florida is the only case where the entire state experienced court-ordered desegregation.

(3) A control group for Group A was obtained by taking all districts in the same states with the same demographic characteristics but which had not experienced court-ordered busing (with the exception of California, where the control cities were confined to Los Angeles County);

(4) Year-to-year enrollment data was obtained for most districts from Office of Civil Rights reports (HEW) from 1967 to 1974, with 1975 data obtained from district officials;

(5) Information about the nature and the date of desegregation orders (and the date of the implementation, if different) was obtained by telephone interviews with the school district superintendant or his designated representative;

(6) The basic strategy of the analysis was to compare the rate of white and black loss (or gains) two years *before* the first order of mandatory desegregation with the rate of loss in the four years *after* the start of its implementation (when these dates differed, it was generally due to an appeal to higher courts, during which time the status of the order was in question). In the case of Group A, the before-after differential was compared to its control group.

The results of the analysis can be easily summarized. For the Florida group, there was virtually no increased white enrollment loss after the court orders. Likewise, for districts with 10 to 20 percent minority, there was only a slight before-after difference. For districts over 50 percent minority, there were substantial losses of white enrollment *before* the busing orders, averaging 8 percent per year, which increased to 13 percent after the start of desegregation.

However, for the districts with enrollments between 20 and 50 percent minority, the effects are substantially greater. For districts without developed suburbs (generally large county districts), the pre-busing white loss is 1.2 percent per year compared to a post-busing loss rate of 6.3 percent per year for two years. In the third and fourth post-busing year the loss drops back down to 2.1 percent. Minority enrollment rates change only slightly.

In the 20-50 percent districts with developed suburbs -- Group A, most of which are central-city districts -- the effects are the greatest. The average white loss before court orders is 2.2 percent per year, while the post-busing loss jumps to 10.4 percent per year in the first two years and remains at 6.5 percent during the third and fourth years. The control group shows a pre-order loss of 2 percent and post-start loss of 4 percent. Thus, even though I restricted my analysis to court-ordered busing cases, my results strongly support the Coleman findings. If the percent minority is low, then the effect of busing is minimal; if the percent minority is high, then an effect exists but it may be less important since the rate of white loss is already high. The effect of court orders is strongest when the proportion of minorities is intermediate, and especially if there are nearby suburbs where white families can relocate.

The fact that the effect of court orders tapers off in the third and fourth years suggests that the effect is not permanent. Nonetheless, the annual rate of loss is high enough to reduce the initial white enrollment by one-third to one-half after several years. This will cause fully *half* of these Group A districts to become predominately minority by the fall of 1976. I agree with Coleman that, in many districts, the court orders intended to reduce segregation have actually expanded it.

Obviously, this is not the last word on the topic; like all the other studies, my own has a number of methodological limitations. But taken together, the four studies do converge on at least one conclusion: Under certain conditions, desegregation and court-ordered busing can contribute substantially to white flight.

## A CLOSING COMMENT

In spite of the mounting evidence that school desegregation is not a socially beneficial policy, and in fact may be counterproductive, it is still not clear how the courts will respond. Busing is still being ordered, controversy still rages within sociology over the adequacy of this new evidence, and so far little of this material has been considered explicitly in a court deliberation. School desegregation has such an incredible ideological momentum that objective and rational assessment of its true effects often seems unattainable.

An example is Pettigrew and Green's conclusion that proof of the white flight thesis should not lead us to condemn mandatory busing, but rather to advocate mandatory metropolitan busing. But if such policies are not constitutionally required, how are we to convince the public that mandatory metropolitan busing is socially beneficial and therefore desirable? In my opinion, until there is solid evidence that educational and social benefits of desegregation outweigh its harmful effects, it is not a policy that should be imposed upon an unwilling public. In the long run we may damage race relations and create even greater--and more intractable--amounts of racial isolation.

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